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STATE FOR NEA, H, IO/UNP AND NEA/MAG

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV MO WI
SUBJECT: SAHRAWI ACTIVIST RENOUNCES MOROCCAN CITIZENSHIP

REF: A. RABAT 0908
1B. RABAT 0849

Classified By: DCM Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On November 13, prominent Sahrawi independence activist Aminatou Haidar renounced her Moroccan citizenship at the Laayoune international airport. Although her family and a government attorney had urged her to reconsider, she opted to return to the Canary Islands. Immigration officials had been ordered to facilitate her entry in hopes of avoiding a publicity stunt, but were surprised when she took the drastic step of renunciation. GOM officials did question Haidar about aspects of her recent trip abroad, but they never formally arrested her, and she was in no way mistreated. Haidar made no secret during her travels abroad over the past two months -- often in the company of Algerian or Polisario officials -- that she intended to challenge GOM authorities in some way upon her return. The Mission will continue to remind both GOM officials and Sahrawi activists that incidents like this do nothing to advance future UN-sponsored Western Sahara negotiations. END SUMMARY.

What Happened at the Airport

12. (U) On November 13, Aminatou Haidar, a prominent Sahrawi human rights and independence activist, returned to Morocco from a multi-week international tour that had taken her to Nigeria, the U.S., Belgium and Spain. While abroad, she had held meetings with high-level officials and prominent NGOs in all countries and accepted several awards, including the Civil Courage Prize from the Train Foundation in the U.S. Upon her much-publicized arrival from the Canary Islands, Haidar refused to present her Moroccan passport to immigration officials at the Laayoune international airport and insisted she would fill out standard immigration paperwork only if she were permitted to declare her nationality as "Sahrawi." Immigration officials subsequently referred her to "secondary," where the chief of airport immigration again urged her to present her Moroccan passport and to enter the country quietly. She again refused and, at this point, announced her intention to renounce her Moroccan citizenship.

13. (U) Moroccan immigration officials responded by calling in a Ministry of Justice attorney, who explained to Haidar the legal ramifications of such a decision. She also met separately at the airport with several members of her family and with the leader of her clan, all of whom urged her to reconsider her decision. Despite their efforts, Haidar insisted on signing a document formally renouncing her citizenship. She did so in the presence of the attorney and her family members. At this point, according to press reports, she handed over her passport over to MOJ officials.

With her refusal to enter the country, immigration officials then gave her the option of returning to her place of departure, which she accepted. Haidar boarded the next flight back to the Canary Islands, which departed early on the morning of November 14.

What Else Happened

¶4. (C) Senior GOM officials in both Laayoune and Rabat had been expecting Haidar to engage in some type of publicity stunt upon her return but admitted that they were surprised that she went so far as to renounce her nationality. According to the chief of staff (COS) to Laayoune's Wali, i.e., the senior Laayoune-based MOI official, the MOI had given airport immigration authorities specific instructions to facilitate Haidar's entry and to do everything possible to minimize a possible publicity stunt in connection with her return. The GOM was fully aware that she would be traveling in the company of Spanish and Moroccan journalists. The Collective of Sahrawi Defenders of Human Rights (CODESA) -- the Moroccan NGO that Haidar leads -- had issued press releases publicizing the date and time of her return. However, the COS said, immigration officials were unprepared for Haidar -- who holds a Moroccan civil service job and whose family is Moroccan -- to take the dramatic step of renouncing her citizenship.

¶5. (C) CODESA and some other NGOs quickly issued press statements denouncing the whole event and accusing the GOM of arresting, detaining and even "abducting" Haidar. This was not the case. MFA and other MOI contacts acknowledged that immigration and police officials asked Haidar questions about her trip abroad. In particular, they were concerned about money they alleged she had accepted from a Nigerian NGO as well as her extensive contacts with Algerian and Polisario officials in Nigeria and Europe. However, they insisted that at no time was she formally arrested or imprisoned. In response to our specific expressions of concern about Haidar's human rights, several senior GOM sources have repeatedly assured us that immigration officials treated her with dignity and fully respected her basic rights -- a claim consistent with press reports.

Comment: What Next

¶6. (C) According to press reports and CODESA representatives, Haidar arrived safely in Spain but has now threatened to go on a hunger strike until Moroccan authorities agree to permit her to return to Laayoune as a "Sahrawi national." Her demand will not be met any time soon. Meanwhile, Moroccan officials recognize that the whole episode has been poorly interpreted internationally, and they lament that events like this and like the arrest of the seven activists last month (reftels) are likely to continue. The Moroccan view of this recent spate of "provocations" engineered by the Polisario and by Algiers in an attempt to undermine the upcoming informal round of UN talks tentatively scheduled for late November. Whether there is any truth to that argument, we have repeatedly over the past four days urged GOM interlocutors to remain on the positive paths they had already charted in terms of supporting a resumption of the UN-sponsored negotiations; calling for dialogue and increased confidence building measures with Algeria; continuing to improve social, economic and human rights in Western Sahara; and tolerating dissenting opinions no matter how distasteful or insulting they find them. Our MFA interlocutors do not need to be convinced of these arguments. However, others in the GOM) in the MOI and elsewhere -- are less likely to take the high road in response to future provocations as blatant as Haidar's. End Comment.

http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Moro_cco

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